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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a model program for training volunteers to lead parent education groups. Over a 3-year period, the program trained 30 volunteer parent group leaders who were members of the Junior League of Boston. Discussion provides background information on the program and detailed information on ways to build parent education leadership skills with volunteers. Introductory subsections describe participant selection, curriculum, and program outcomes. The discussion that follows concerns: the ability to be empathetic, the practice of eliciting issues rather than giving solutions, teaching content, specific teaching skills involved in planning a parent group session, the development of structured exercises, and the handling of difficult moments. Subsequent discussion describes a developmental approach to modeling the model. It is concluded that there is an enormous pool of potential volunteers who can be trained to lead parent groups; that volunteers come from many different racial, ethnic, social, and cultural backgrounds and age levels; and that trainees can develop extensively in a relatively short period of time. It is believed that the model has been extraordinarily effective in training volunteers to be parent group leaders. (RH)

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MODELING THE MODEL: TRAINING VOLUNTEERS TO LEAD PARENT GROUPS

(based on a workshop presented at the 10/88 Family Resource Coalition Conference in Chicago)

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Running head: Braun/Training Volunteers

Program Overview

Background

This paper describes a model program for training volunteers to lead parent education groups. The volunteers were members of the Junior League of Boston and the trainers were Linda Braun and Fran Litman, members of the faculty of the Center for Parenting Studies at Wheelock College in Boston.

For several years, the Center for Parenting Studies sponsored a lectureship series for parents of young children led by T. Berry Brazelton, M.D. He is a warm, caring and charismatic man to whom parents readily open up with their questions and concerns. In the evaluation forms completed by participants after Dr. Brazelton's lectures, large numbers of parents expressed an interest in continuing to meet on a regular basis to discuss parenting issues, but the Center for Parenting Studies had no way of serving them. The Center decided to look for funding to help train volunteer leaders for these parent groups. The Junior League of Boston came to us at just that time.

The Junior League is a service organization, and it provided us with a grant to train its members -- young parents themselves -- to lead parent groups. In the three-year program, 30 volunteers (approximately 10 leaders a year) have been trained as parent group facilitators. These volunteers are leading parent groups in and around the city of Boston.

Our goal in developing this program was to train parent group facilitators and to provide them with the knowledge and skills that they would need to lead effective parent groups. We communicated the importance of being non-judgmental: that there is no one right way to parent or to lead a parent group. The job of facilitator is to create the climate and provide the structure that allows parents to reflect on their own parenting, to learn by sharing with others and to develop new parenting and problem solving skills.

Participant Selection

The selection of participants included an initial guided interview with those interested in admission to the program. Our goal was to identify volunteers with warmth, friendliness and a sense of where they were as human beings. Those being interviewed read a case study and discussed it with us. The case study described parents who have recently had a child and were making decisions regarding the trade-offs of working and staying at home, commuting, promotions, etc. We asked the prospective participants what they would do, what advice they would give. We looked for flexibility in their responses (i.e., "Well, I would probably do this, but I would help her figure out what she wanted to do."). Some of the volunteers were more flexible than others; some of them needed the training to become less judgmental and more empowering. The discussion gave us a sense of where people began. We also asked each volunteer to fill out a self-assessment form, on which they rated themselves on their own knowledge and experience.

In the middle of the training and at the end of the training, participants also engaged in a self-assessment. The assessments extended their ability to look at themselves and to analyze their skills. We generally started with 10-12 volunteers in each training group, and usually two or three people dropped out before the end of the program. For some, the commitment was too great; for others, leading parent groups was not what they wanted to be doing. This self-assessment process was one of our best accountability tools, because most of the volunteers knew what they could and could not do, what they liked to do and what they did not like to do. We tried to create a climate that was trusting enough for people to look at themselves honestly and say, "this isn't really right for me" or "this is what I want to do."

Some of the volunteers had never worked outside of the home; some had worked in business, some in social services, but none as parent educators.

Curriculum

The volunteers had 36 hours of classes. Thirty-two of those hours, 16 of the 18 classes, were held before the volunteers began to lead parent groups. Some of the class topics included understanding parent issues and concerns, developing parent group content, designing session formats and developing group leadership skills. The book used as the text was Helping Parents in Groups: A Leader's Handbook (Braun, Coplon & Sonnenschein, 1984, and may be obtained from the Wheelock College Office of Continuing Education). Both trainers and trainees found that the text provided a clear step-by-step approach to organizing and leading parent groups.

As trainers, we tried as much as possible to model the model. We treated the volunteers in the training session as if they were a parent group. For example, we used their issues to illustrate points, and we responded to them as a parent group leader would to a parent. When the volunteers completed the training, they commented on hearing themselves saying and using some of our words and phrases in their parent groups.

Results

Upon completion of 32 of their 36 hours of training, the volunteers went out and led groups. Sometimes they led groups independently, but usually they felt more comfortable co-leading the group. They started out leading short-term groups of four sessions, and then, if they chose, they led six session groups. The parents in their groups generally wanted more sessions. We considered that a sign of success. The evaluations from the parents in the groups were outstanding. The volunteer leaders usually returned to us "on high" -- feeling very enthusiastic, competent and successful. In addition, there was obviously value in having parent lay people lead parent groups. We found that once we gave volunteers some of the key skills for planning and conducting parent group sessions, they could and did relate exceedingly well to the other parents.

Building Parent Education Leadership with Volunteers

Ability to be empathic

Once I had an office next door to a middle school guidance counselor. I would sit in my office and listen to her with students and be impressed with her skill and empathy in dealing with pre-adolescents. One day she

approached me and asked if she could assist me in leading one of the "Parents of Middle Schoolers" groups. I considered this an excellent idea, and we scheduled a group.

During the first couple of sessions, the guidance counselor was reserved and reticent. After the second session, she said to me, "I don't think that I can do this. I am so angry with these parents. I just feel so bad for their kids." The parents had been presenting the typical, predictable "parents of pre-adolescent" issues, saying things such as, "How can I make my child practice the piano?" or "What should I do when s/he doesn't do her/his homework?" The guidance counselor so identified with the children that what these parents said was very disturbing to her. She decided not to participate in the group.

One of the most important characteristics of a parent group leader, or any group leader, is the ability to empathize with the issues of the group that you are leading.

Eliciting issues rather than giving solutions

In our training we sensitized the volunteers to parent issues and concerns. Many began the training program with strong ideas about what they thought was right or wrong parenting behavior. They also had many of their own issues to resolve. In order to be effective as parent group leaders, it was necessary that they get beyond their personal issues and judgments and "get into the shoes" of the members in their group. This took place over the course of the 18 weeks.

Building this sense of empathy was accomplished in a number of ways throughout the training. First of all, we spent some time talking about

their issues. From the very beginning, when they introduced themselves, they began to talk about their issues. We gave them an opportunity to share their concerns and to hear from one another. In that way we treated them as a parent group themselves as we modeled the model.

Another way in which we sensitized the volunteers to the issues and concerns of parents was by training them in being able to elicit and hear parent concerns rather than simply rushing to help parents find solutions. One technique was to show the initial parent interview by Dr. Brazelton with a new mother in his video, What Every Baby Knows. We asked the volunteers to listen very carefully to the questions that the parent asked and also to listen for how Dr. Brazelton responded. In doing this we separated: a.) sensitizing them to parents' real issues and concerns, from b.) solving the parents' problems. It is natural for some of us to hear a parent say, "My child is 23 months old and still has a pacifier -- what shall I do?" and respond, "Well, if you want to get rid of the pacifier, here is what you can do...." It is important for parent group leaders to avoid that advice-giving, problem-solving role and to take the time to elicit the real issues from parents. We believe that when parents hear their own real issue, they frequently come up with their own solution -- one that is helpful to them.

Another technique in sensitizing the volunteers to parent issues and concerns was to have them interview parents. The volunteers chose two or three parents, and we trained them in conducting open-ended interviews. After the interviews the volunteers came to the session and began to identify major recurring and predictable issues from what they had heard and seen.

They realized that parents do have predictable issues and that most parents simply want to do what is best for their children in the way in which they know how.

As the volunteers acquired the skills that allowed them to be empathic to parents and see the value in recognizing parents' real issues rather than simply trying to solve their expressed problems, we simultaneously taught them the **content** and **leadership skills** necessary to lead parents in groups.

Along with sensitizing the volunteers to issues and concerns, we taught content. Parent group leaders need to have a knowledge base on topics about which parents want and need to know. Whether talking about discipline or sibling relationships or work/family issues, group leaders have to have knowledge of the key ideas and information of that particular subject.

During the course of the 18 weeks we were always teaching the volunteers content **as well as** skills and attitudes. Content, skills and attitudes were interwoven into the sessions' format using the concept of modeling the model.

An example of interweaving content/skills/attitude is seen in the use of the Brazelton video. There is a fair amount of content in the video regarding what 15-month-olds are like. We happened to use that particular video to look at models for empathy, but there was clearly content related to child development to be learned.

Content was also taught through the readings. Along with the text (Braun et al. 1984), each volunteer had a notebook of articles related to

parent education as well as bibliographies related to particular parenting topics. The volunteers read in the areas in which they were particularly interested in leading groups (i.e., discipline, sibling rivalry, communication).

In addition, we taught content during the sessions by delivering information through mini lectures and audio-visual aids and by involving the volunteers in "structured exercises" (Braun et al. 1984). For example, in teaching about discipline, we went around the group and asked each of them to share something that they knew about "discipline." Using their ideas and information, we expanded on ideas and discussed issues, points of views and theories.

Teaching skills; planning a session

We taught the volunteers that there was a three-step process in planning parent group sessions (Braun et al. 1984). We have a strong philosophical commitment to the following three-step process:

* The first step is to gather information about the topic, to learn more about the topic.
* The second step is to identify the key ideas. What are the things that you want parents to know (based on their issues/concerns)?
* The third step, and always the third, is to then plan the actual session.

We advised the volunteers that one does not just pull an idea "out of the air." In planning their practice sessions, the volunteers chose a topic of interest, say discipline, for a particular developmental level (ie. preschoolers, adolescents, etc). They gathered information about their topic and then identified some key ideas.

Some examples of key ideas about discipline would be:

"Discipline as a form of teaching -- not a form of punishment."

"Positive approaches to discipline are more effective than negative approaches."

"There are many positive approaches to discipline; parents do not have to get 'stuck in a rut.' Some positive approaches are: acknowledging children's feelings, preparing children in advance, redirecting attention, setting limits, etc."

After gathering considerable information and developing a list of key ideas, the volunteers planned an actual session based on their key ideas. It was striking that the volunteers were able to write their own curriculum and go with what was "in them" based on what they knew about the parents with whom they would be working. We are convinced that that is why the training and subsequent parent groups were so successful. The volunteers created an exceptional range of seminar session formats with clever and meaningful exercises. It was powerful. We learned from them constantly.

Teaching skills; developing structured exercises

Any task or activity posed by a group leader that encourages active involvement by all participants and fosters learning qualifies as a structured exercise. The range of exercises that can be used is vast and depends on the needs of group members. These exercises can be used to present a topic in an interesting and meaningful way; they can also perk up a discussion that has gone flat or lost focus. The best exercises are frequently designed by a leader who has specific goals for a group. These goals can

involve either process or content. For example:

Situation: Several discipline techniques were introduced in a previous session.

Goals: To reinforce concepts, to provide an opportunity for practice and to model the model for volunteers.

Exercise: The leader writes two stories about parents and children and distributes them to the group. One story concerns a 4-year-old who takes money out of his mother's purse; the other describes a three year old who has tantrums whenever she does not get what she wants. Members are divided into small groups to generate possible causes for behavior and options for the parent. Afterward, the whole group shares their "solutions." We modeled many different kinds of structured exercises, and we encouraged the volunteers, when developing structured exercises, to think in terms of the following categories: inventories, real or hypothetical case vignettes, scripts of plays, role plays, childhood recollections, drawing tasks and thought-provoking questions (Braun et al. 1984, pp. 91-93). We modeled for the volunteers the importance of being able to think through a problem because that is what we wanted them to do as leaders -- to help people think through their problems rather than immediately suggesting a particular solution. So, using discipline again as an example, when a volunteer trainee raised a particular issue of her own, we modeled a problem-solving process. We asked, "What are all the possible reasons that x may be acting this way? Why might x be acting in a particular way?" The group generated many different ideas.

During this process the parent with the question was able to say, "I

don't think that is it, but I do think that it could be that." The volunteers experienced the process of thinking through a problem and the value of group members' learning from one another.

Then we went to options or solution-gathering. The volunteers came to realize that parents latch on to yelling and spanking and other negative approaches to discipline because they do not know what else to do and that helping parents to see their many options allowed them to feel less helpless. We kept using the word options: what are this parent's options? what might s/he do? They came to see that one cannot mandate new attitudes, but one can give people alternatives and options.

Teaching skills; handling difficult moments

When training the volunteers, they often worried about, "what happens if... what do you do when.... what if a parent does not agree with me?" They imagined all of these difficult things happening, and they were quite concerned about it. We assured them that by setting a trusting and accepting climate and tone there would be a minimal amount of conflict. A difficult moment (Braun et al. 1984) is defined as something that happens in a group that causes tension either to group members or to the leader. For example, at the first session of our new training group, one volunteer introduced herself and told us that she had a 6-month-old baby, and then she shared that things had been very difficult because she had been diagnosed with cancer just prior to the baby's birth. She then started to cry. Now that is a difficult moment in a group: a first session where a parent shares something that is emotional, meaningful and upsetting both to her and to the other people in the group. Every group is going to have difficult

the volunteers needed to know how to handle these moments. We taught the skills of handling difficult moments both by using what happened in our groups and modeling effective responses and by developing structured exercises specifically focused on those skills.

The key point volunteers needed to know was that one could not just pass over the moment. One must deal with a difficult moment, as hard as it is. At the very least, a leader needs to respond to (acknowledge, validate) feelings and, when appropriate, universalize (broaden) the issue (i.e., "You sound ambivalent. It is quite common for parents of newborns to feel...."). The parent needs to feel understood, that you have heard their feelings without judging them and without denying them.

When the woman in the volunteer group said that she had cancer, there was an inclination in the group to want to say, "Well, we hope that things will turn out all right." But that is not necessarily what that mother wanted to hear right at that moment. In that situation I asked for a little more information. Most of us are afraid to ask. But my experience has been that most people do want to talk about an issue that they raise. I asked her when she was diagnosed, and she said, two months ago and told the group the type of cancer she had. I asked her what type of treatment she was receiving. She shared some information and expressed how it was affecting her. What she came back to, and what we ended up validating, before we moved on was how difficult it was to parent her infant because she had to leave him frequently for her treatment along with the difficulty of always having her mother or mother-in-law in her home. This mother was given the chance to say what she had really meant when she said, "I have

cancer," and, having relieved the tension of a difficult moment, the group was able to move on.

Modeling the model/a developmental approach

As you have read, our major approach to teaching volunteers to become effective parent group leaders is modeling the model. We model planning and we model conducting group sessions. We then explicate what we have done by discussing listening skills, clarifying skills, summarizing skills and the various other skills that we have used -- skills that are required of all effective parent group leaders. We model in leadership what we want them to model in parent groups.

In conducting each of the sessions for the volunteers, we did not just walk in and "chew the fat," for that is what the volunteers would have done with their groups. On the other hand, we took care to be flexible and responsive to the group's needs. Parents in a group should feel as though what is happening to them is spontaneous and flexible and open, while having confidence that the facilitator has a clear sense of what is happening. The experience is analogous to a preschooler's. In a good preschool, children walk into a carefully designed environment with many options available to them. The teacher has established a program that makes it possible for children to learn at their own level in a supportive environment. A skilled group leader does the same thing. S/he sets a climate and structures an environment that makes it possible for parents to talk about their issues, to feel safe and comfortable, to learn something and to leave feeling less helpless and less isolated than when they arrived.

Conclusion

There is an enormous pool of potential volunteers to train to lead parent groups. They come from many different racial, ethnic, social and cultural backgrounds -- from teenage parents to senior citizens. Trainers of parent group leaders need to be able to validate the volunteers and extend what they bring to you. One can take people very far in a short period of time. Parent groups are a crucial intervention in supporting today's parents; we believe this model has been extraordinarily effective in training volunteers to be excellent parent group leaders.